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Inter-municipal management of tourism resources – has the debate been hijacked?

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# Ski resorts in crisis and territorial construction in French Catalonia

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

- 1 Developing or converting the economy of tourist areas involves management of the inter-municipal tourism resource. Inter-municipal relations are often presented as a “management of interdependencies” (Mayntz, 1997), the aim of which is to make public action more efficient through the sharing of resources. It has even become a tool for territorial control (Cattla, 2007) where the boundaries between the public and private sphere become blurred and alliances contribute to increasingly hybrid forms of solidarity (Simoulin, 2007). Certainly, in the tourism sector it has experienced rapid development over the last fifteen years, since it has been made unavoidable by European and regional standards and policies, the additional principles of financial round-tables, and recourse to multiple public-private co-financing arrangements<sup>1</sup>.
- 2 The only way of evaluating its effects is to conduct an in-depth case study. Generally, case thinking is found to be richer than exemplification where researchers are always tempted to choose the example that is most suited to what they want to show, thus discarding, whether it be deliberate or not, the constraints that contradict their approach. In the field of ski resorts in crisis, a case had to be chosen that met several conditions: a rich and well-established tourism economy in a winter sports resort, a history of inter-municipal relations that had been subjected to the policies of different administrative authorities set up by the State over the past 40 years, providing us with the possibility of distinguishing between deadweight effects (from contributions of DGE-DGF type) and local willingness to group together, an area with sufficient potential tourism resources to

share new resources, one or several ski resorts in crisis, the willingness to work in a network and to facilitate the sharing of experiences and, of course, a committed policy of grouping together within the framework of an inter-municipal project. To do this, a research study was carried out in 2011 in the French département of Pyrénées-Orientales (Vlès, 2011) based on more than 50 interviews with actors in spatial development and some 60 study reports and texts. The aim was to determine if the inter-municipal construction was resulting in this simplification and this democratisation of local organisation that American institutionalists call “the new institutionalism in organizational analysis”, a normative isomorphism model of public action. In mountain areas, several factors have contributed to create particular types of spatial management, making integrated tourism development difficult, with its numerous complementary seasonal activities. Studying these relations of dependency and causality is important at a time when Prefects are finding it difficult to implement their new departmental plan for inter-municipal cooperation (SDCI (Sub-Directorate for Coordination and Interventions), article 35 of the Act of 16 December 2010). Certainly, increasing numbers of municipalities are transferring responsibility for their tourism to the collective authority to which they belong, with a view to sharing resources and reducing operating costs (CNT, 2005). But this transfer mainly concerns only visitor accommodation, entertainment, and promotion of the tourist area, while in the ski resorts, historically it has been multi-purpose syndicates (associations) and especially the very powerful mixed syndicates that have been responsible for developing tourism resources over the limited territories of the resort municipalities (Vlès, 2011, pp. 4-8).

- 3 In the case of the ski resorts of the eastern Pyrenees, opening up the management of a resort’s tourism resources to neighbouring municipalities (anchoring the resource) remains problematic. Resources are subject to little sharing and debate is largely absent.

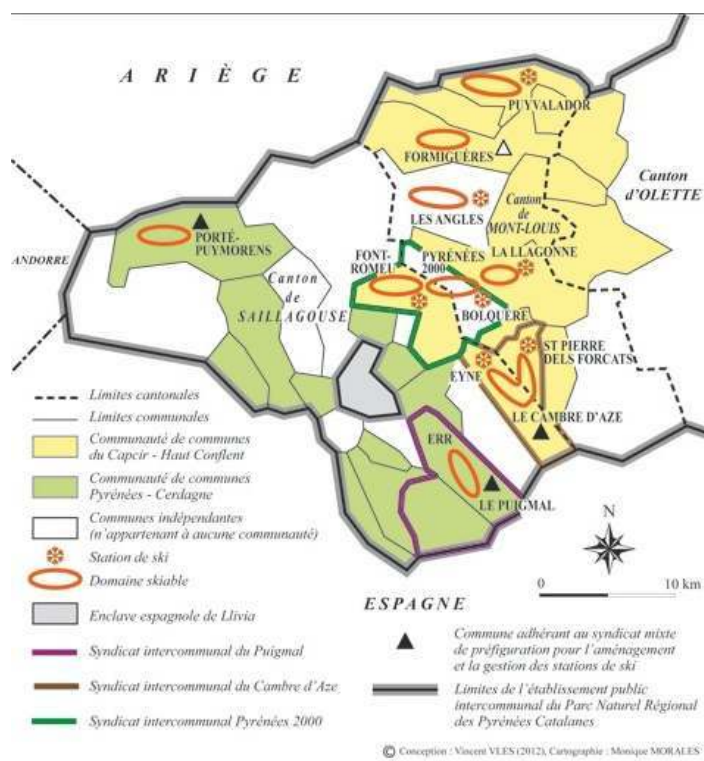
## The difficulties of the tourism resource of French Catalan ski resorts

- 4 The historical links that unite the tourism growth poles with their pre-tourism foundations (culture, heritage, economy, traditions of local populations) are still put forward in research studies as a condition for territorial construction (CNT, 2005; Clarimont, Vlès, 2006). Perret, in his approach to localised touristic systems (Systèmes Touristiques Localisés (1994)), interpreted the reality of ski resorts and mountaineering, using two resort models, in terms of the ties (“anchoring”) that they maintain with their “territory”, i.e. the social, cultural, political and economic space surrounding them. At that time, it was already a major step forward in research to have come to the hypothesis that differential analysis could be conducted on “snow” as productive space and to demonstrate the existence of very different models in the group under study. The first model is that of the ski resort created *ex nihilo*, a sort of “imported” touristic growth pole, essentially built and controlled by outside operators and imposed on a local political, social, economic and, to a greater or lesser extent, dispersed space, in short, a purpose-built “resort product” in stark contrast to the local economy and culture (“archipels d’altitude”, Wosniak, 2006). The second development model, in sharp contrast to the first, concerns the “village resort”, a ski resort run by local residents, developed from an endogenous system of production, integrated in mountain society and culture, and in historical continuity with the values of small farm society. Here, tourism was conceived

and promoted from within the village with a view to developing small crafts and a pluri-activity related to winter activities (Perret, 1994).

- 5 This dialectic perspective enabled researchers to undertake a whole series of detailed studies, in the Alps, on the forms of spatial anchorage (i.e. the manner in which resorts become integrated in their surrounding territory, Marcelpoil, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010) and to demonstrate their role in the development of resorts (François, 2007). The bifurcation of their development paths and their touristic dynamics demonstrate that in the Pyrenees, as in the Alps, these models are no longer so clear-cut. Their touristic dynamics was for a time modelled on the bipolar schema where the “endogenous product” resort (bearing witness to the promotion of a regional cultural identity and socio-economic integration in the local environment, a fact which would help renew them) contrasts sharply with the “exogenous-product” resort (resulting from the application of “foreign” and capitalistic land and property models, responding to a logic of globalisation and promoted by actors who are generally international). In the Pyrenees, such models have perhaps never applied because the purpose-built resort does not exist and because municipalities have always had a say in development and planning decisions. In addition, times have changed, spatial/regional organisation has become more structured with decentralisation and the “Mountain Act”, and the anchoring of resorts is now determined by local forms of governance (Taiclet, 2007) and inter-municipal institutions (Desage, Guéranger, 2001). Finally, and most importantly, interdisciplinary progress has revealed the weight, in territorial management, of the interdependencies between tourism, agriculture and “residentiality”, the fact of living in a place. Anthropology, ecology, and urban planning and development have placed the issues for ski resorts in an economic field that is much more interdependent, systemic in nature, and long-term. The concept of “anthroposystem” (Levêque, 2003) that places the future of tourism in a balanced natural and agrosylvopastoral mountain system enables us to realise in the Pyrenees how all factors subject to change in a society and environment are interdependent and require inter-municipal management (Vlès, Frochot, 2011). Breaking with the productivist model, this stance with respect to Nature and culture is becoming even stronger now in the light of the very poor recent statistics for downhill skiing, showing a steady decline in the market share of “Catalan snow” (ODIT France 2009).
- 6 After health spas, winter sports resorts have for long been a big attraction for tourists in the French Catalan Pyrenees, but winter sports are now no longer sufficient on their own to sustain tourism in the long term. Financial structures must be set up to share responsibility for such activities among the different communities concerned, and this will depend on inter-municipal solidarities (Francès i Tudel, 2006; Arcuset *et al.*, 2006). Ties must be strengthened between resorts, touristic resources and the local economy, and this calls for a diversification of recreational activities (everything must not depend on skiing alone), which in turn requires forming associations, grouping together existing products that are dispersed both geographically and in the way they are organised, but above all it requires creating new products through inter-municipal cooperation.

Figure 1. Inter-municipal cooperation and tourism: Catalan Snow resorts in 2012

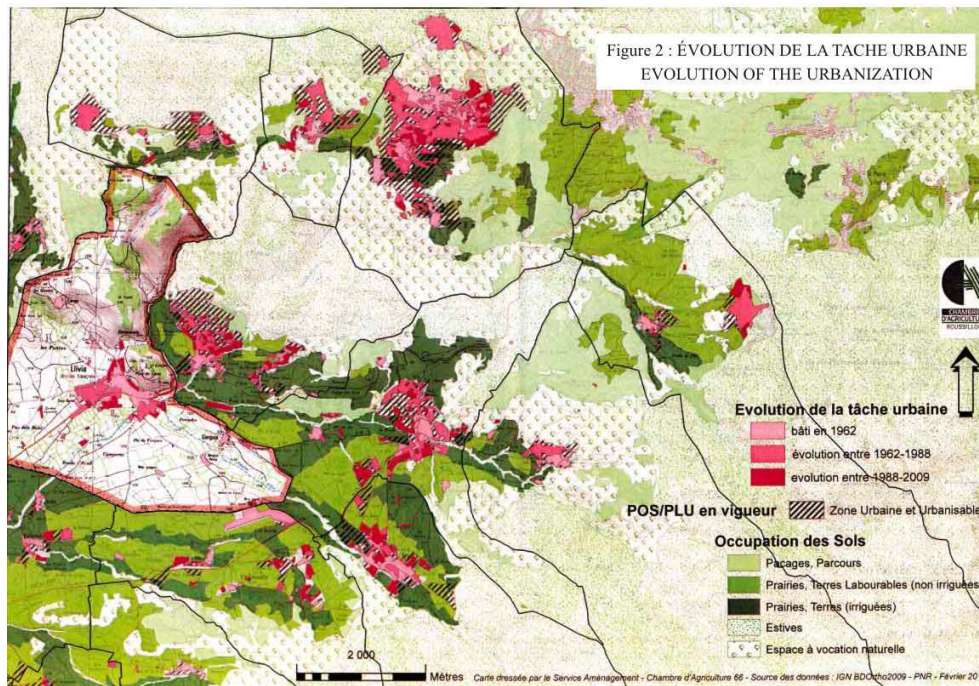


- 7 In the Pyrénées-Orientales department, there are numerous resorts (11, concentrated over a very small area: figure 1). Snowfall is random and declining (OPCC, 2011, pp. 6-8; Marc, 2011). The tourism branch of the economy, however, is preponderant (3/4 of jobs) and skiing accounts for 85% of incomes. Autonomous companies, EPIC, and associations are finding it difficult to balance their very fragile budgets and finances, and in any event are dependent on budgetary help from the resort municipalities. The municipal debt of certain ski resorts and the operating deficits over the last two years are of such magnitude (-200 K€ in Err, -800 K€ accumulated in Eyne since 2011...) that recourse to inter-municipal, departmental or regional solidarity is unavoidable. A number of resorts are threatened with closure (Porté-Puymorens, Formiguères, Eyne, Saint-Pierre-dels-Forcats (Cambre d'Aze), Err (Puigmal)), while Font-Romeu, Bolquère, and Les Angles may escape, even in the worst-case scenario of a temperature rise of +2° (Vlès, 2011). Overall, since 2006, a year of particularly low snowfall, the financial situation of municipalities managing ski areas has been very difficult: in the absence of investment or the possibility of going into debt – both of which seem unlikely in the best of cases – they will not be able to maintain their ski areas (Mission Régionale, 2007).
- 8 Research has revealed the disjuncture between the political areas, often quite small, where the management and development policies of these resorts are drawn up (i.e. the municipality) and the far more extensive areas where the economic flows of tourists take place and which benefit from their economic spin-off effects (Clarimont, Vlès, 2006). But mountain tourism produces a *space of local tensions, or solidarities*, which goes well beyond the administrative framework of the municipality, and which was for a long time the basic administrative unit for ski facility installation and operating policies. The resorts have created increasingly complex flows and spatial dynamics that go well beyond their local area. Municipal investments for Catalan skiing account for 21 million euros but



generate more than 300 million euros per year in economic benefits, spread over more than 40 municipalities (CCI, 2007). In the upper cantons, for every Euro a skier spends on ski lifts, he or she spends 11 €, on average, for other products in the surrounding area. This activity generates more than half the turnover of the 600 businesses in the area (tradespeople, building industry, tertiary services) (Vlès, 2001, p. 12). More than a third of tourist spending is reinvested in the residential economy of the upper cantons by businesses, especially in the building trade (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Evolution of the urbanization**



- 9 Thus a total of 450 million euros of annual turnover in these two cantons (14,000 permanent residents) comes directly from investments supported by only 10 municipalities, which are finding it difficult to reimburse their debt. The problem of resource management is related to the territorial anchorage of the resorts and lies in the equalization of the fiscal effort between those communes that bear the cost of investment and those that benefit from it without carrying the burden of the debt. The changing snowfall levels in the Pyrénées-Orientales department, the continuing decrease in the number of ski days and number of skiers each season, and the cumulative effect of annual operating deficits make it increasingly urgent to address the question of who takes responsibility for the cost of modernising facilities (most ski lifts are obsolete) and searching for new development paradigms (the shift towards “four-season tourism”).

## Inter-municipal cooperation: presented as a solution for restructuring ski resorts, it now appears unstable and struggling

- 10 Apart from dismantling the resorts, as happened ten years ago in Mas de la Barque in the Cevennes, inter-municipal cooperation appears the only possible solution. It offers resorts the opportunity to diversify their activity and to reorient towards four-season

tourism. From the point of view of *leisure products*, the inter-municipal base is the only one capable of ensuring a *viable mountain tourism resource*, with a rich and diversified production of sites and events (by complementarity and the grouping together of different elements making up the tourism “product”) that meets the requirements of four-season tourism. Because of the very dispersed nature of service providers, sharing the region’s total tourism product is the only way of providing a complete range of amenities and events. Inter-municipal cooperation demands managing activities and accommodation in a complementary manner at the scale of the valleys. Similarly, this sharing of resources makes it possible to use the elasticity of prices in relation to demand to reach competitive thresholds on the market. Although inter-municipal collaboration has no impact on fixed costs, some variable costs may be considerably diminished thanks to sharing the costs of operating facilities or renting accommodation. In terms of tourism development, it is financially difficult for a small municipality to act alone in implementing local economic measures of any importance. In terms of promotion, grouping together enables access to quality labels (Park products, Region of Art and History, etc.) and the building of a coherent image. It links the area to a brand, a name, and a project process shared at the inter-municipal level. Finally, the distribution of local products and leisure activities requires understanding the trading or catchment areas and networks, and training, informing, stimulating and helping producers through a sales force. Here again, grouping together is the only way to become integrated in an international distribution network, and to access the market. Lastly, the limited population of most Cerdan touristic municipalities makes them permanently dependent on financial organisations to carry out their projects. The debt ratio of these municipalities is among the highest of French ski resorts. Eyne, for example, was placed under trusteeship for 14 years and the debt per inhabitant is the highest in its demographic category in France (Mission régionale, 2007).

- 11 The difficulties relating to the financial situation of resorts do not explain all the mistakes made by Cerdan governing authorities. In the Pyrenees, a whole range of factors are contributing to the increasingly hybrid nature of public action, private intervention, the types of activity and the actors concerned. The traditional type of visitor is slowly giving way to a residential clientele favouring second homes, resulting in an unusual form of “urban sprawl” in the mountains (Figure 2). This involves land and property transformations from which each municipality individually benefits in the short term (Vlès, Frochot, 2011). The clientele of the ski resorts, who have become increasingly demanding and reactive in response to conditions relating to snowfall, housing, the living environment and access to modern urban services and facilities (Hatt, 2011), are leaving the resorts that they know to be in difficulties. Several municipalities thus have to deal with the sometimes burdensome legacies of the Fordism/Taylorism model resulting from the “Plan Neige” (Arnaud, 1975; Marcelpoil *et al.*, 2010), without having the means. In the hope of finding, or generating loyalty among, customers tempted by increasingly varied activities (Nature and water-based leisure pursuits, heritage discovery), and with a view to meeting financial deadlines resulting from the period of intensive skiing development (ski lifts, snow cannons, safety measures), a few rare stations of modest size tried to group together to share equipment modernisation costs. Unfortunately, the failures have been numerous. The inter-municipal cooperation solution is a real sieve, where the holes change position each year (Figure 1). A few examples will illustrate this point. The resort of Eyne joined with Saint-Pierre in 1996 to share its ski area in the turbulent “syndicat

mixte du Cambre d'Aze" (their governing bodies were plagued with resignations, strikes, walk-outs), then in 2010 changed names from the "communauté Pyrénées-Cerdagne" to that of "Capcir-Haut Conflent". In 2011, it dismantled its Inter-municipal Tourism Office to make it municipal. In 2012, it hopes to join forces with just one municipality, Font-Romeu, in a quality labelling experiment ("village éco-terroir") that none of the neighbouring municipalities will be involved in. In fact, Font-Romeu, was initially part of the Pyrénées-Cerdagne community, which it has just left. Bolquère and Les Angles, the "heavyweights" among Catalan ski resorts, do not belong to any community. Formiguères has just left an association of resorts in difficulty to go it alone. Finally, Err is financing, alone, the company that operates the Puigmal ski area, with which two other neighbouring municipalities are also associated. In short, the area has a strange form of inter-municipal solidarity, and numerous problems: the operating companies or associations (Syndicats) are often under pressure from the banks to repay their debt, the ski areas are sometimes even managed by bankers (case of Cambre d'Aze), they remain isolated, their future is uncertain and relations with municipal councils are tense. Paradoxically, because they cannot get out of these problems alone, their debts deprive these resorts of developing any strategies for forming lasting and solid associations.

## Territorial construction that ignores the democratic debate on managing the resource

- 12 With the first snowfall crises of the 1990s, inter-municipal management of the resource was rapidly put in place under the double impetus of economic necessity (to financially save the Catalan ski resorts) and the involvement of the ideal rescue authority, the Region. But this solution has not worked, since the method of operation chosen was based solely on discrete negotiations between a few mayors and the President of the Region, and on decisions taken within the framework of the EPCIs or Syndicats, without any public debate, information campaigns, or popular consultation. The main concerns were in fact purely financial. This depoliticization of municipal action (Desage et Guéranger, 2011), this exclusion of the people enabled backroom deals to be made without any verbal jousting or expressions of contradiction. In short, the negotiations that took place avoided conflict and hijacked any public action around purely municipal interests. The "confiscation" of democracy is one of the alarming effects of the inter-municipal management of tourism resources, even if the managers are not legally bound to consult the "demos". Instead of solving the problem of the dichotomy between the management of political areas and that of touristic flows, the ever-changing inter-municipal cooperative arrangements have added a democratic deficit by neglecting the citizens in discussions about their future. Thus, it is a strange form of governance that, in the name of debt reimbursement, forgoes any expression of democracy, avoiding any debate with the population on local public action regarding tourism policy. This inter-municipal "government", not yet subject to direct universal suffrage, reduces the control of the local economy, in which tourism accounts for more than 85 % of activity, to a series of boxes, cells, or territorial recesses without any anchorage or hinterland that is solidly accepted by the tax-payer.
- 13 These forms of resource management, which under the guise of inter-municipal cooperation were pushed through without considering the opinion of the people, the "demos", seem to be at work particularly in those ski resorts below the threshold of



operational profitability, a consequence of poor snowfall and climate change phenomena (OPCC, 2011). The links between Porté-Puymorens, Formiguères, Le Cambre d'Aze, and Err were formed without consulting the citizens (who finance debt and deficits through their taxes), and without involving them in formulating the issues at stake or the strategies. With no project culture, these operating associations, or syndicates, are places where the discourses of experts dominate and carry through the decisions based on the best possible compromise between different interests, which are, of course, often contradictory – since the resorts are competing among themselves. Today, seven different inter-municipal organisations are rendering the debate far from transparent for the population: the inter-municipal association of Puigmal (1978) that manages the ski area bearing its name; the inter-municipal association of Cambre d'Aze that manages its ski area, but not the two resorts of Eyne and Saint-Pierre-dels-Forcats whose jobs depend on it; the Capcir-Haut-Conflent community of municipalities that groups together 17 municipalities (including those of Cambre d'Aze) but where skiing is not among its responsibilities, as is the case in the Pyrénées-Cerdagne association; the inter-municipal association in charge of operating and developing the resort of Font-Romeu-Pyrénées 2000, created in 2002 between Font-Romeu and Bolquère with the idea of setting up a single entity responsible for operating the ski lifts and managing the ski area (Vlès, 2011). The picture would not be complete without the Regional Natural Park of the Catalan Pyrenees, an inter-municipal administrative area (EPCI) that hopes to anticipate the future by strengthening its means for action through local solidarity, but is careful to avoid, in its Charter, any debate on the future of the resorts. Finally, the recent creation of a seventh organisation, the joint planning association (*syndicat mixte de préfiguration*) for the development and management of 3 resorts in serious difficulty, completes the wide range of interests and projects. This latter association itself also brings together other associations: the Cambre d'Aze, Puigmal, the EPIC of Porté-Puymorens, the department, the region, and communities of municipalities. It has set up a 47 million euro investment Master Plan aimed at upgrading these resorts by replacing the out-dated ski lifts (more than 30 years old) and dismantling those that are under-used. But the project is far from certain to succeed: the municipalities, elected representatives, and local residents once again have not been involved in the project, Formiguères has left the group, the department is not present, and the Region remains sceptical.

- 14 Outside of any public debate, the map of these various groups that all claim to be the answer to “rationalising operations with a view to enabling the touristic, economic and social development of the resorts and the local area” (Montagne et Management, 2011), demonstrates the *technocratic polymorphism* of inter-municipal relations: different levels and skills that overlap but are not pulling in the same direction with regard to managing the resource. We do not know whether skiing will survive in these mountains on a permanent basis (faced with decreasing and less reliable snowfalls), since the resort-municipalities and current operational structures would have to go into further debt for 60% of the funding for this uncertain project. It is unlikely that tax payers will be ready for this leap of faith into the unknown, or even if they will be capable of it. This is undoubtedly why this debate has been hijacked: getting out of a crisis by dismantling something is somewhat unacceptable.
- 15 The multi-municipal anchoring of mountain ski resorts and the construction of the inter-municipal resource are thus taking place in a context of territorial construction that is far

removed from democratic debate. At work here, is a technocratic, fragmented and polymorphous management of both space and the tourism resource.

## Conclusion: a tourism resource subject to weak democratic governance

- 16 In the eastern Pyrenees, the incorporation of tourism in territorial construction has, in the main, not been subject to a shared overall vision based on common objectives. Back-room negotiations by local mayors have transformed inter-municipal tools into neutral areas, exempt from partisan differences admittedly, but also from common projects that go beyond mere financial management. Consequently, the territorial anchoring of winter sports resorts has changed little, whatever situation they find themselves in today as a result of a sometimes anachronistic history and globalized markets. Deficient snowfall, the difficulties of operating costs, the erosion of visitor numbers, the setting up of adaptation policies, and difficult budgetary situations have not been sufficient technical factors to give birth to a supra-municipal political authority capable of reinforcing local solidarity. The tacit rule of non-interference in the strategies and affairs of neighbouring resorts has enabled conflict to be avoided. This has taken place, however, through agreements between mayors, with the citizen sidelined from the debate. In this respect, inter-municipal constructions grouping together mountain resorts and valley areas appear above all as a form of “technocratic governance”, undoubtedly related to the preponderant role of the mayor and the municipality as the organising authority in the French political system (and Spanish, Clarimont, Vlès, 2006). After 40 years of the reformist myth of “modernisation” of local public action, the passage from institutional territory to functional territory, although it may now be more or less correctly implemented in the area of facilities, networks and services, has generally failed with regard to the economic management of tourism and, more particularly, the ski resorts. This “failure” explains the great stability, not to say standstill, of the resorts’ touristic resource.
- 17 Adjustments to the ties between the resource and the local area (anchorage) have been imposed by financial imperatives, in an economic system that in some ways denies the freedom of municipalities to public debate on such issues. This constraint contradicts the reality of modifying these ties as a project of local political importance. It reveals a form of denial of inter-municipal governance as an object of public debate, since governance rests on the *freedom to adhere, or not*, to a project and not only when municipalities are obliged to seek forms of assistance from authorities at a higher level.
- 18 This failed attempt to reinsert the tourism resource into the local area is also due to all the failures of the productive processes resulting from “rushing headlong” into development projects without sufficient thought and consultation: impasse in the continual construction of cable cars financed by isolated municipalities, costs and dangers of the use of snow cannons that increase debts but do not ensure stable long-term growth in visitors, numerous urban wastelands resulting from tax-relief policies invented and promoted by the State to create accommodation in tourist residences so as to “balance the accounts of ski-lift operators”, unexploited tourism resources linked to heritage, and vain attempts to extend the seasons. There have been so many difficulties and policies, and the clear failure of the latter in recent years has led to a lot of mistrust

regarding other national and regional policies, including the recent plan concerning the voluntary territorial reinjection of the municipalities. Whether compulsory or voluntary, the recourse to public works as a systematic means to achieve desirable growth since the 1950s, has in fact made the population very sceptical (Vlès, 2011). As the model based on the “total ski” experience no longer applies in the Pyrenees, it appeared futile to municipalities to set up inter-municipal cooperation arrangements to implement resource management policies based on a *project culture* and debated in a democratic manner.

- 19 Based on observations of inter-municipal relations around 11 resorts in the eastern Pyrenees, it seems clear that the phenomena of amenity migrations, in affecting mountain areas with high levels of tourism, does not encourage inter-municipal cooperation and financial equalisation relations. In time, it is to be hoped that the inter-municipal dynamics of tourist resorts will become adapted to more creative cycles of genesis, competition, and construction, in what Christophe Bouneau calls neogenesis (2008). In this regard, the complex alliances between re-appropriation or re-invention of vernacular traditions and resort innovation processes currently seem more directly related to crises (climatic, financial, transformation of leisure practices) than to a local policy sustained by a project culture. It would seem that it is the crises, rather than State policy and its hybrid reform, that are the driving force in the appearance in mountain areas of new territorial ties for the management of the tourism resource.

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## NOTES

1. The number of groups has multiplied by ten over a ten-year period. Responsibility for tourism is considered by 42% of groups as a compulsory responsibility (CNT, 2005).

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## ABSTRACTS

The efficiency of inter-municipal relations in regenerating or restructuring the economy of mountain tourist areas is well suited to an analysis in terms of governance. Focussing on the negotiation, consultation and cooperation processes between the public and private spheres, and associated networks of actors, provides an opportunity to assess the ties of solidarity in the management of crises. More specifically, this study examines inter-municipal relations in the context of the crisis now facing many small ski resorts in the Pyrenees, where declining snowfalls may lead to the dismantling of facilities or their adaptation to a hypothetical “4-season tourism”. The manner in which inter-municipal governance of the tourism resource is implemented in this context reveals fractures among the different actors relating to the management of jobs, housing, interests, resources, the issues at stake, and representations. Inter-territorial dynamics results in different types of cooperative arrangements and nested management systems that remain isolated, each covering competing projects. In the 11 Pyrenean ski resorts of French Catalonia, the different types of governance often remain narrowly delimited and compartmentalised, and inter-municipal cooperation takes place without any real democratic discussion with the resident population. Since debate is very rare, inter-municipal relations are at pains to bring about consensus between decision-makers on how to save the local ski areas threatened with permanent closure by a structurally deficient snowfall.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** inter-municipal relations, territorial construction, territorial governance, tourism, ski resorts

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